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What's in the Numbers? Child Welfare Statistics and the Children (NI) Order

Abstract

This paper draws attention to the importance of routinely collected administrative data as an important source for understanding the characteristics of the Northern Ireland child welfare system as it has developed since the Children (NI) Order 1995 became its legislative base. The paper argues that the availability of such data is a strength of the Northern Ireland child welfare system and urges local politicians, lobbyists, researchers, policy makers, operational managers, practitioners and service user groups to make more use of them. The main sources of administrative data are identified. Illustration of how these can be used to understand and to ask questions about the system is provided by considering some of the trends since the Children (NI) Order was enacted. The 'protection' principle of the Order provides the focus for the illustration. The statistical trends considered relate to child protection referrals, investigations and registrations and to children and young people looked after under a range of court orders available to ensure their protection and wellbeing.

Introduction

Routinely collected administrative data are essential for describing, questioning and understanding any child welfare system. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to this important source of information for anyone wishing to understand how the Northern Ireland system is developing following the implementation of the Children (NI) Order 1995 (the Order). This follows in the path of those who have made use of Northern Ireland administrative data to describe the child welfare system in the past, prior to the Order (Graham, 1980; McCoy, 1982; Pinkerton, 1989; Switzer, 1997). The main contemporary sources of administrative data are identified and this is followed by illustrating how such information can be used to understand and to ask questions about the system.

The strategic goal of the Order was to realign the balance within the child welfare system from reactive child protection towards family support (Kelly and Pinkerton, 1996). To that end the Order is underpinned by a set of principles. These are often referred to as 'The Five Ps': Paramountcy, Parental Responsibility, Partnership, Prevention, and Protection. Despite the rebalancing intention of the Order, it can be argued that the Protection principle has continued to dominate. Accordingly it provides the focus here for illustrating how administrative data can be used to critically reflect on the features of the system as it had developed since the Order. Provision within *Part VI: Protection of Children* and *Part V: Care and Supervision* of the legislation makes it clear that children should be kept safe and protected by state intervention if they are in danger. Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs), as the providers of statutory services, have a duty to investigate when there is reason to believe that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm (Article 66). There are also a range of orders available to provide statutory powers: such as Care and Supervision Orders (Article 50), a Child Assessment Order (Article 62), and an Emergency Protection Order (Article 63).

Activity under the child protection aspects of the Order is captured routinely as administrative data. This allows statistical trends to be identified in regard to child protection referrals, investigations and registrations and in relation to children and young people looked after under a range of court orders. Those statistics can also be set within the context of more general trends in the numbers and characteristics of children and young people in the general population. As will be illustrated this data can be used to understand and to ask questions about developments within the Northern Ireland child welfare system and what impact the legislation has had. Although it will not be illustrated in any detail here, it is important to note that such data also provide the basis for comparisons across UK jurisdictions and with the child welfare systems of other countries (Thoburn, 2011; Munro and Manful, 2012).

Sources of Regional Child Welfare Statistics

Since the Order there has been a steady improvement in the availability of statistics relating to the operation of the Children Order. That said, they are subject to gaps and discontinuities along with difficulties around definitions and collection. It is always helpful to recall Miles and Irvines' general caution about government statistics cited by Switzer (1998) in her discussion of Northern Ireland child care data.

"Official statistics are produced in specific organisational contexts and involve in their production the active interpretation of events as well as their simple recording in terms of officially defined categories. They are therefore not objective reflections of social reality, but their production involves a host of decisions about the objects, techniques and methods involved" (Switzer, 1998: 118)

The Community Information Branch of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) provide child welfare statistics that can be accessed at <https://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/topics/dhssps-statistics-and-research/childrens-services-statistics>.

Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland, first published in 2012, presents data relating to children in need, child protection, looked after children, residential homes and day care provision for children aged under 12 by HSCTs and includes five year trends where data is available. Until 2012 this publication was divided into two separate publications titled *Children Order Statistical Tables*, last published in 2012, and *Children Order Statistical Bulletin*, last published in 2009 and then re-named *Children Order Statistical Trends* (last published in 2011). *Quarterly Child Protection Statistics for Northern Ireland*, available from 2010 onwards, provides information on the number of child protection referrals received during each quarter and the number of children on the Child Protection Register at the end of each quarter by age, gender, category of abuse, legal status and duration on the register.

Although those are the two main sources of statistical information about the Northern Ireland child welfare system there is also a range of other publications available. These are outlined in Table 1. These statistical publications are derived from the Children Order Statistical Returns and Delegated Statutory Functions (DSF) Returns which are provided by the five HSCTs to the commissioning body, the Health and Social Care Board, and to regional government, through the Community Information Branch in the DHSSPS. The goal of 'rationalisation of the data collection has led to a gradual process of utilising the DSF returns over the children order returns ...to ease the burden on data producers' (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2014: 1).

Title of Publication	Details
<i>Quarterly Child Protection Statistics for Northern Ireland</i>	Number of children on the Child Protection Register at the end of each quarter by age, gender, category of abuse, legal status and duration on the register. Number of child protection referrals received during each quarter by source of referral. First published in July 2010.
<i>Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland</i>	Data relating to children in need, child protection, looked after children, residential homes and day care provision for children aged under 12 by HSCTs. Includes five year trends where data is available. First published in October 2012. Replaces two previous publications titled <i>Children Order Statistical Tables</i> (last published in January 2012) and <i>Children Order Statistical Bulletin</i> , last published in March 2009 and then re-named <i>Children Order Statistical Trends</i> (last published in January 2011).
<i>Children in Care in Northern Ireland</i>	Information on children who have been looked after continuously for 12 months or longer at 30 September each year including educational achievements, religious background, ethnicity, disability, placement, health, economic activity and criminal convictions. First published in September 2010.
<i>Kinship Care: Children Living in Households Without a Parent Present Northern Ireland 2011</i>	Information on the number of children living in a household without a parent present on the Population Census day (27 th March 2011). Published in January 2015.
<i>Children Adopted from Care in Northern Ireland</i>	Information on children adopted from care during the last financial year. Range of information presented about the children, their adopters and

	the duration between the various stages of the adoption process. First published in June 2006.
<i>Northern Ireland Care Leavers</i>	Information on those aged 16 – 18 who left care during the previous financial year including educational achievement, economic activity and placement prior to leaving care. Circumstances of those who have left care at the time of their nineteenth birthday are also reported including the frequency of contact with social services, economic activity and current accommodation. First published in January 2015. Replaces two previous publications titled <i>Care Leavers Aged 16–18</i> (last published in January 2014) and <i>Care Leavers Aged 19</i> (last published in February 2014 and previously titled <i>Former Care Leavers in Northern Ireland</i>).

Table 1: Regional Child Welfare Statistical Publications in Northern Ireland

Source: <<https://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/topics/dhssps-statistics-and-research/childrens-services-statistics>>

Children and Young People in the General Population

Looking firstly at the demographic context of child protection trends, in 2014 there were 433,161 children and young people (i.e. persons aged less than 18 years) in Northern Ireland, representing 23.5% of the total population. As outlined in Table 2, the total population has increased each year from just under 1.7 million in 1998 to just over 1.8 million in 2014. As part of that increase the number of adults (i.e. persons aged 18 years and above) has gone up from just over 1.2 million in 1998 to just over 1.4 million in 2014. The number of children and young people in the general population decreased year on year in the ten year period from 1998 to 2007 but has increased each year since; from just under 430,000 in 2008 to just over 433,000 in 2014. As seen in Figure 1 the number of children and young people as a proportion of the total population has consistently declined each year from 27.6% in 1998 to 23.5% in 2014. Children and young people now account for less than one quarter of the total population, whereas in 1971, for example, they made up over a third (34.6%) of the population (NISRA, 2015). The proportion of males to females is fairly close and has shown no major change over the time period 1998 to 2014; with males being in the majority throughout by approximately 2.5%.

	CHILD (0-17 years)	MALES (0-17 years)	FEMALES (0-17 years)	ADULT (18+ years)	TOTAL POPULATION
1998	463,790	236,943 (51.1)	226,847 (48.9)	1,213,979	1,677,769
1999	460,366	235,375 (51.1)	224,991 (48.9)	1,218,640	1,679,006
2000	456,404	233,780 (51.2)	222,624 (48.8)	1,226,540	1,682,944
2001	451,174	231,449 (51.3)	219,725 (48.7)	1,237,664	1,688,838
2002	446,141	228,815 (51.3)	217,326 (48.7)	1,251,393	1,697,534
2003	440,300	225,796 (51.3)	214,504 (48.7)	1,264,624	1,704,924
2004	435,164	223,132 (51.3)	212,032 (48.7)	1,278,878	1,714,042
2005	431,801	221,331 (51.3)	210,470 (48.7)	1,295,932	1,727,733
2006	429,457	220,114 (51.3)	209,343 (48.7)	1,313,656	1,743,113
2007	429,152	220,007 (51.3)	209,145 (48.7)	1,332,531	1,761,683
2008	429,945	220,395 (51.3)	209,550 (48.7)	1,349,207	1,779,152
2009	430,050	220,448 (51.3)	209,602 (48.7)	1,363,283	1,793,333

2010	430,248	220,516 (51.3)	209,732 (48.7)	1,374,585	1,804,833
2011	430,938	220,940 (51.3)	209,998 (48.7)	1,383,380	1,814,318
2012	431,574	221,414 (51.3)	210,160 (48.7)	1,392,060	1,823,634
2013	432,015	221,387 (51.2)	210,628 (48.8)	1,397,710	1,829,725
2014	433,161	221,896 (51.2)	211,265 (48.8)	1,407,337	1,840,498

Table 2: Population of Northern Ireland by Children and Adults (1998-2014)

Source: NISRA (2015)

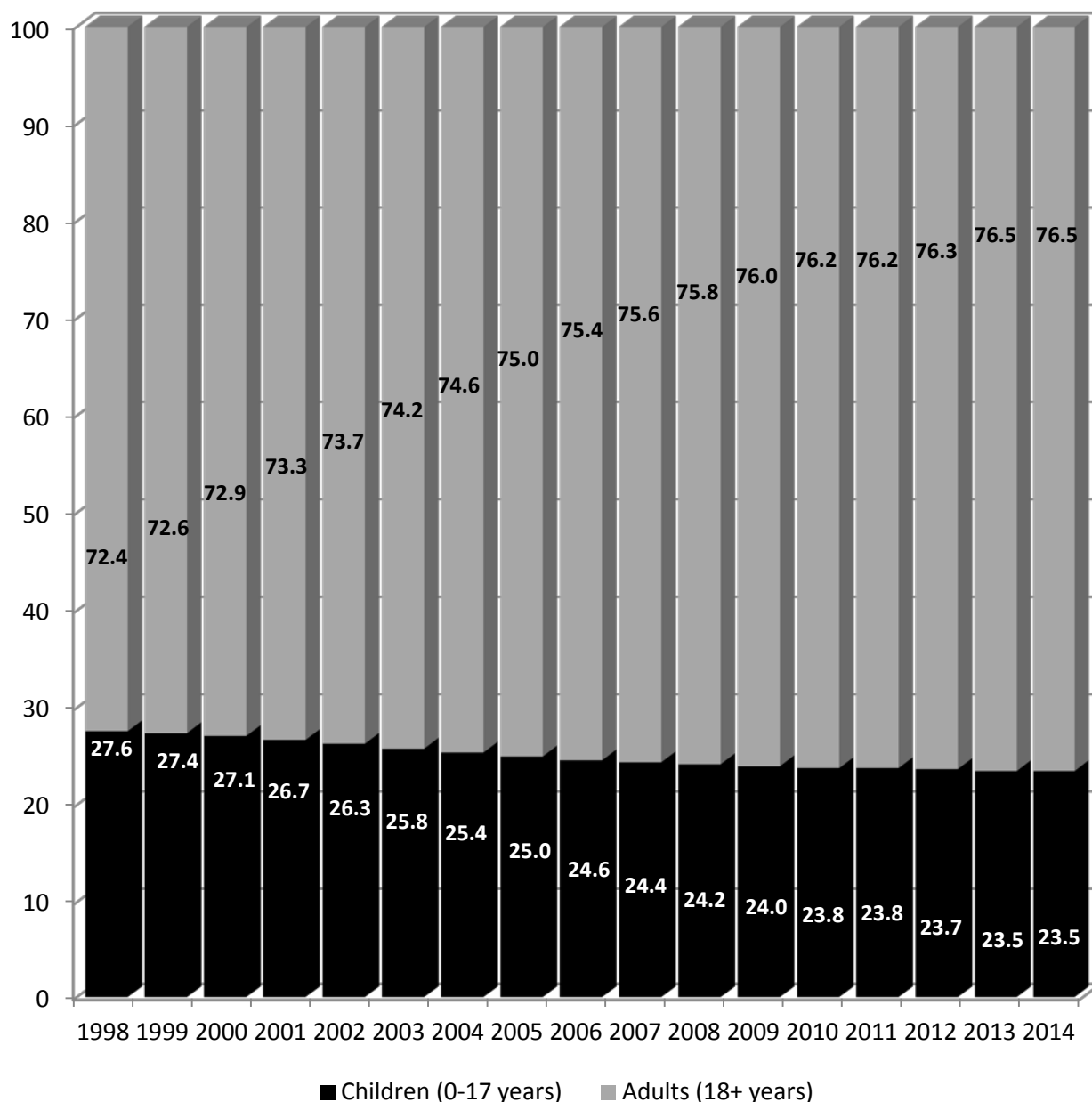


Figure 1: Child Population of Northern Ireland as Percentage of Total Population (1998-2014)

Source: NISRA (2015).

Child Protection Referrals, Investigations and Registrations

The declining proportion of children within the population is not reflected in the level of child welfare activity. On the contrary referrals to children's social services have risen continuously over the period of the operation of the Children Order, to the extent of 84%. The rise in all referrals has been continuous between 2008 and 2014 and they have increased by 43% in that period from 28,088 to 40,165 (Waugh and Rodgers, 2014). That trend might be interpreted as in line with the strategic intent of the Order to realign services towards family support and children in need. Family support, early intervention and prevention inevitably generate referrals and identify larger pools of need than reactive, child protection. However in order to explore that line of thought further it is important to know what is happening in regard to child protection activity.

Figure 2 displays the number of child protection referrals received, and the number of child protection investigations undertaken, from 1998 to 2015. A child protection referral is a referral in which 'the initial assessment indicates that there may be child protection issues' (Waugh and Rodgers, 2015: 23) and it may lead to a child protection investigation under Article 66 of the Children Order. The figures show that the general rise in all child care referrals is not matched by a drop in child protection activity, but nor is linked to an increase in the number of child protection referrals and child protection investigations. As can be seen from Figure 2, the numbers of both did decline continuously from 1998 to 2004 but then increased from 2005 to 2011 and then started to fall again from 2012 onwards. The sharpest rise in both child protection referrals and investigations occurred between 2008 and 2011 with child protection referrals increasing by 56% (from 3,071 to 4,804) and investigations increasing by 67% (from 2,306 to 3,840).

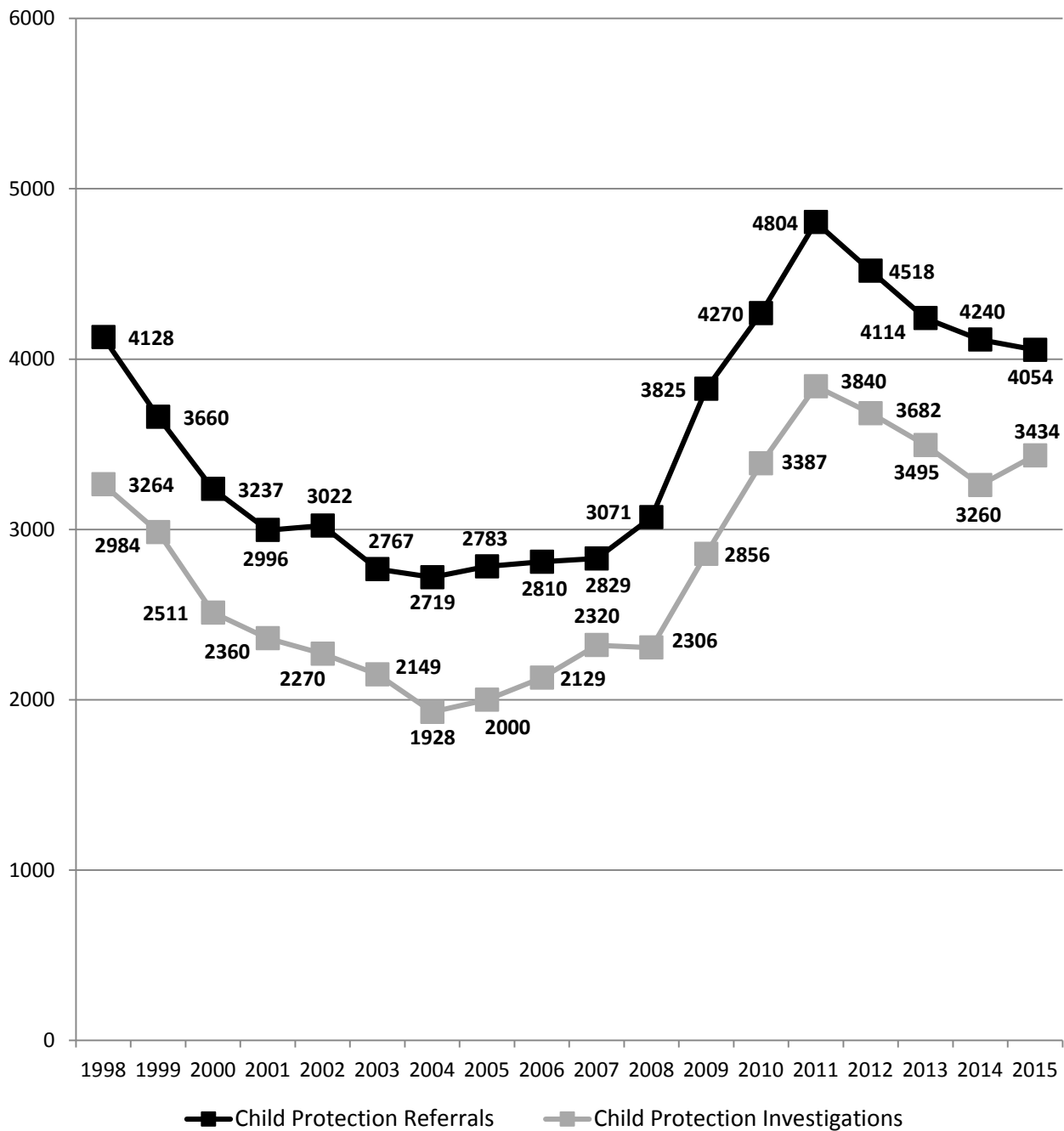


Figure 2: Number of Child Protection Referrals and Investigations (Year Ended 31st March 1998-2015)
Sources: Mooney et al., 2003b; Fisher and Fitzpatrick, 2010; Rodgers and Waugh, 2013; Waugh, 2012; Waugh and Rodgers, 2014; 2015.

An initial child protection case conference may follow a child protection investigation when it is considered that a child is at risk of significant harm and registration to the Child Protection Register (CPR) under one or more category of abuse (confirmed, suspected, or potential) is one possible outcome. Table 3 outlines the number of initial child protection case conferences held, and the number of registrations to the CPR, from 1998 to 2015. The number of initial child protection case conferences held per year remained relatively stable between 1998 and 2006 but there was a 58% increase between 2007 (n=1,564) and 2011 (n=2,473) before the numbers stabilised again at around the 2,200 mark from 2012 onwards. It is also noteworthy that there has been a general increase in the percentage of initial case conferences that lead to registration on the CPR from 64.8% in 1998 to 87.8% in 2015.

	No. of Initial Child Protection Case Conferences	No. and % of Initial Case Conferences Leading to Registration	Actual Number of Registrations and % increase/decrease from previous year
1998	1,434	929 (64.8%)	1,004
1999	1,460	997 (68.3%)	1,093 (+9%)
2000	1,382	985 (71.3%)	1,067 (-2%)
2001	1,278	922 (72.1%)	970 (-9%)
2002	1,283	1,036 (80.7%)	1,080 (+11%)
2003	1,320	1,060 (80.3%)	1,102 (+2%)
2004	1,226	944 (77.0%)	962 (-13%)
2005	1,322	1,100 (83.2%)	1,129 (+17%)
2006	1,373	1,137 (82.8%)	1,166 (+3%)
2007	1,564	1,266 (80.9%)	1,305 (+12%)
2008	1,782	1,463 (82.1%)	1,497 (+15%)
2009	2,159	1,810 (83.8%)	1,829 (+22%)
2010	2,136	1,820 (85.2%)	1,846 (+1%)
2011	2,473	2,098 (84.8%)	2,123 (+15%)
2012	2,253	1,904 (84.5%)	1,915 (-10%)
2013	2,202	1,873 (85.1%)	1,877 (-2%)
2014	2,313	1,985 (85.8%)	2,004 (+7%)
2015	2,159	1,896 (87.8%)	1,904 (-5%)

Table 3: Initial Child Protection Case Conferences and Registrations on the Child Protection Register (Year Ended 31st March 1998-2015)

Sources: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; Fisher and Fitzpatrick, 2010; Mooney et al., 2002; 2003a; Waugh, 2012; Rodgers and Waugh, 2013; Waugh and Rodgers, 2014; 2015.

The pattern with regard to registrations to the CPR, as indicated in Table 3 and Figure 3, is similar with the number of registrations remaining relatively stable at around 1,000 per year between 1998 and 2006 although there were some notable variations year on year. The most substantial variations, however, occurred between 2007 and 2011 when there was a 63% increase in registrations from 1,305 to 2,123 before the number stabilised again at around 2,000 per year from 2012 onwards. The number of children on the CPR at 31st March each year, as outlined in Figure 3, increased year on year from 2004 to 2009 with the overall increase being 76%. The number increased by 16% from 1,417 in 2004 to 1,639 in 2006 and by 38% from 1,805 in 2007 to 2,488 in 2009. Numbers on the CPR remained reasonably stable between 2009 and 2011 at around 2,400 before beginning to fall again

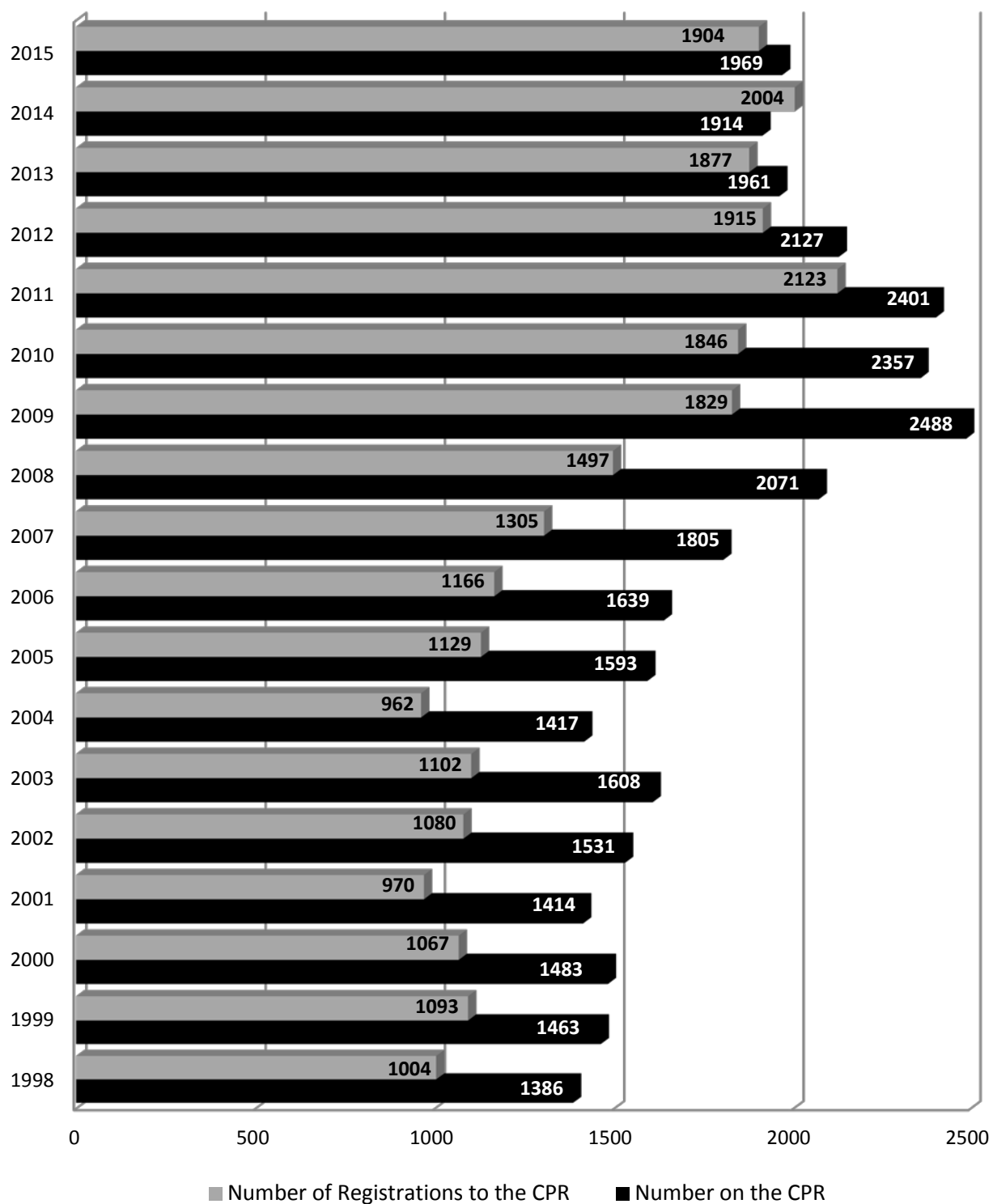


Figure 3: Number of Children on the Child Protection Register and Number of Registrations on the Child Protection Register (Year Ended 31st March 1998-2015)

Sources: Fitzpatrick et al., 2009; Mooney et al., 2001; 2003b; Waugh, 2012; Waugh and Rodgers, 2015.

Using Trends to Pose Questions

By noting these trends it is clear that what is actually happening in the child welfare system is not simply a function of need, crudely represented by numbers of children in the general population, or of implementing the Order. Accordingly questions are raised as to what other factors may be in play. One explanation worth reflecting on is that high profile child protection cases covered by the British media have had a major impact. Here consideration of comparative English statistics can be of help. Based on those statistics it has been noted that there was an unprecedented rise in applications for Care Orders under Section 31 of the Children Act 1989 by local authorities in England following publication of the Serious Case Review Executive Summary in relation to baby Peter Connolly in November 2008 (Haringey Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2008). From 2007/08, when the number of applications stood at 6,323, they increased 40% to 8,832 by 2009/10 and 76% to 11,110 by 2012/13 (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, 2014). This was linked to a rise in the number of child protection referrals; due to a greater concern about the mismanagement of child protection amongst both the public and professionals and an increase in the number of children placed on child protection plans (Macleod et al., 2010).

So it may be that the Northern Ireland statistics are registering a 'Baby P effect' (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, 2009), carried over from GB into local public concern and professional practice. There is indeed some supporting evidence for this view in that the Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency (2014) reported a 114% increase in Care Order applications from 176 in 2007/08 to 377 in 2012/13. Considering the possible influence of such public and professional concern is not only a question of influence from England but also raises the question of local reasons for intensified attention to child protection. Likely candidates are the publication of two local independent reviews into child deaths - the cases of the McElhill family in Omagh (Toner, 2008) and the case of Madeleine and Lauren O'Neill in Belfast (Boyd, 2008).

Another likely contributing influence to the rise in child protection investigations were the findings of inspections of child protection services in Northern Ireland. A multi-disciplinary, inter-agency inspection led by the Social Services Inspectorate of the DHSSPS, commenced in 2004 with an overview report being published in December 2006 (Social Services Inspectorate, 2006). The report noted '...clear evidence of repeated failures to undertake timely and appropriate assessments and to provide child protection intervention, resulting in children being left at risk...' (Social Services Inspectorate, 2006: 7). That inspection was followed by a review of child protection services by the statutory Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA). That review, which commenced in 2008 and was undertaken in a number of stages, published an overview report (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority 2011) which highlighted deficits in 'compliance with regional child protection policies and procedures' (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, 2011: 5).

Looked After Children

Considering the routinely collected statistics on looked after children adds additional perspective in trying to understand what is driving the system and in what direction. In 2015 there were 2,875 children and young people looked after under one or other of the range of court orders available to ensure their protection and wellbeing. Table 4 displays the number of these children by year between 1998 and 2015. The number of these children per 10,000 in the wider population aged under 18 is also shown. The rise in the rate of Looked After Children has been continuous between 1998 and 2014 (the last year available); moving from 51 per 10,000 in 1998 to 66 per 10,000 by 2014. The actual numbers have also risen during this period by 521, from 2,354 to 2,875. At 22% this is a significant rise. It is important to note that the year on year figures have included reductions in some years. However, with the exception of 2011, when the figure dropped by 95, the number of Looked After Children has increased each year since 2008.

Year	Number of LAC	Rate per 10,000 Population Aged Under 18*
1998	2,354	50.8
1999	2,324	50.5
2000	2,422	53.1
2001	2,414	53.5
2002	2,453	55.0
2003	2,446	55.6
2004	2,510	57.7
2005	2,531	58.6
2006	2,436	56.7
2007	2,356	54.9
2008	2,433	56.6
2009	2,463	57.3
2010	2,606	60.6
2011	2,511	58.3
2012	2,644	61.3
2013	2,807	65.0
2014	2,858	66.0
2015	2,875	-

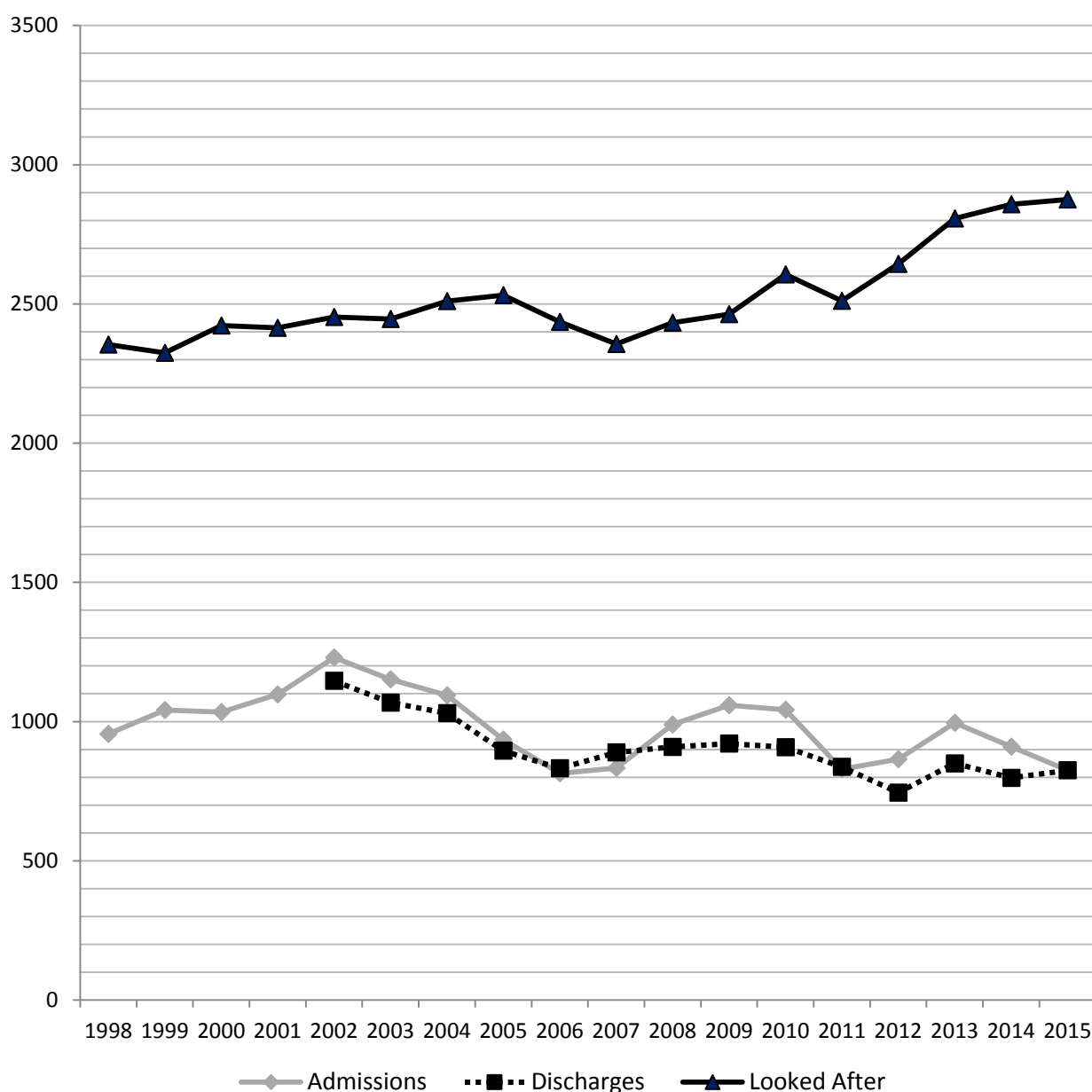
Table 4: Number of Looked After Children and Rate per 10,000 of the Population Aged Under 18 Years (Year Ended 31st March 1998 – 2015)

Sources: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2008a; 2008b; 2010; 2011; 2012; Waugh, 2012; Rodgers and Waugh, 2013; Waugh and Rodgers, 2014; 2015.

*Calculations based on Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2015). Mid-Year Population Estimates. Belfast: NISRA. (Available at: <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp17.htm>)

The number of children and young people looked after in any year reflects the number admitted and the number discharged that year. As can be seen from Figure 4, although the trends for both admission and discharge follow a similar course, at no time has the number of discharges been greater than the admissions thereby resulting in relatively steady growth in the Looked After population. The gap between admissions and discharges is most apparent after 2008. This trend may be further evidence that it is the a climate of concern over children and young people being left at risk by statutory services that is the driving force. Whilst there is no direct relationship between child protection and becoming looked after, those same concerns may well have a bearing on the increased admissions to care and the lower number of discharges.

However in reflecting on the statistics it is also important to recall the imperative in the Children (NI) Order to pursue partnership working and note that the proportion of children looked after on a voluntary basis, 'accommodated' children, continued to account for a significant proportion of looked after children, and even rose slightly during the period - from 22% in 1998 to 25% in 2015. Court enforced orders accounted for most cases throughout (standing at 78% of the LAC population in 1998 and 75% in 2015) but had dipped in the years between 2005 and 2011, making for an annual average of 66%.



**Figure 4: Number of Looked After Children, Admissions and Discharges
(Year Ended 31st March 1998-2015)**

Sources: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2008a; 2008b; 2010; 2011; 2012; Waugh, 2012; Rodgers and Waugh, 2013; Waugh and Rodgers, 2014; 2015.

Number of discharges for years ended 31st March 1998 – 2001 not available.

Table 5 sets out the number and proportion of looked after children and young people by placement type. As would be expected for a population in which the large majority are under 11 years old (69% in 1998 growing steadily year on year to 81% in 2015), the main placement being used is foster care. Over two thirds of looked after children (64%) were in foster care in 1998 and this rose to over three quarters (76%) of the population by 2015. Placements with family followed some way behind throughout the period and also saw a considerable reduction in use – from 22% in 1998 to 12% in 2015. It seems likely that part of that decline was a result of an increase in kinship foster care, but here again it is worth noting the drop started in 2008. The proportion of Looked After children in foster care rose by 17% (from 57% in 2008 to

74% in 2011) and family placements decreased by 16% (from 26% in 2008 to 10% in 2011). This could be reflecting concern over the capacity of families to protect children.

Year	Foster Care	Residential Care	Placed with Family	Other*	Total (100%)
1998	1515 (64.4%)	264 (11.2%)	506 (21.5%)	69 (2.9%)	2354
1999	1506 (64.8%)	260 (11.2%)	488 (21.0%)	70 (3.0%)	2324
2000	1611 (66.5%)	285 (11.8%)	472 (19.5%)	54 (2.2%)	2422
2001	1528 (63.3%)	273 (11.3%)	532 (22.0%)	81 (3.4%)	2414
2002	1513 (61.7%)	299 (12.2%)	534 (21.8%)	107 (4.4%)	2453
2003	1577 (64.5%)	296 (12.1%)	494 (20.2%)	79 (3.2%)	2446
2004	1529 (60.9%)	325 (12.9%)	561 (22.4%)	95 (3.8%)	2510
2005	1606 (63.4%)	317 (12.5%)	500 (19.8%)	108 (4.3%)	2531
2006	1522 (62.5%)	321 (13.2%)	486 (20.0%)	107 (4.4%)	2436
2007	1389 (58.9%)	283 (12.0%)	566 (24.0%)	118 (5.1%)	2356
2008	1376 (56.6%)	319 (13.1%)	622 (25.6%)	116 (4.8%)	2433
2009	1607 (65.2%)	308 (12.5%)	467 (19.0%)	81 (3.3%)	2463
2010	1687 (64.7%)	287 (11.0%)	483 (18.5%)	149 (5.7%)	2606
2011	1862 (74.2%)	239 (9.5%)	258 (10.3%)	152 (6.1%)	2511
2012	1946 (73.6%)	231 (8.7%)	295 (11.2%)	172 (6.5%)	2644
2013	2112 (75.2%)	217 (7.7%)	331 (11.8%)	147 (5.2%)	2807
2014	2156 (75.4%)	195 (6.8%)	357 (12.5%)	150 (5.2%)	2858
2015	2189 (76.1%)	194 (6.7%)	338 (11.8%)	154 (5.4%)	2875

Table 5: Number and Proportion of Looked After Children by Placement Type (Year Ended 31st March 1998 - 2015)

Sources: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2008a; 2008b; 2010; 2011; 2012; Waugh, 2012; Rodgers and Waugh, 2013; Waugh and Rodgers, 2014; 2015.

***Other Accommodation may include: independent living, supported accommodation, secure accommodation, hospital, hostels, aftercare facilities, Simon Community, respite care facilities, bed & breakfast accommodation, bed-sits, dependent living etc.**

Conclusion

By looking at the statistics presented in this paper it should be apparent that useful information is available within easily accessed, routinely collected administrative data. What the paper has also tried to illustrate is that only do these data allow for the description of the characteristics and trends within populations of children and young people receiving services under the legislative mandate of the Children Order, but they also raise questions about the variety of processes in play. It is not just the legislation but also the impact of other factors such as public concern about child protection and professional commitment to partnership with parents and families that determine developments. Administrative data are 'a powerful torch with which to shed light' (Courtney, 2008: 286) and yet are not used sufficiently. For example neither a Northern Ireland Assembly Research Paper (Black 2012) nor a DHSSPS commissioned report (Houston et al 2015) on kinship care address the statistical trends noted above. The availability of trend data should be appreciated as a strength of the Northern Ireland child welfare system. They need to be valued and used by politicians, lobbyists, researchers, policy makers, operational managers, practitioners and service user groups. In this way child welfare statistics can be used to examine the impact of the Children Order with the aim of to developing current policy and practice.

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